

Report of the System Performance Working Group to the NEIL Transit Task Force

The System Performance Working Group has been tasked with considering how well our current transit system is meeting the needs of the region. What does it mean to create a world class transit system that effectively serves the region's residents, communities, and broader economy? How do we measure it? The working group has gathered information from transit agencies in Northeastern Illinois and other regions, and reviewed other research compiled for the Task Force.

We are sharing with the full Task Force for review and discussion the following interim framework, as well as a broad outline of our findings and recommendations to date. We welcome your thoughts to inform both the next steps for our working group, and the preparation of the full Task Force report.

Why Transit Performance is Important

Transit is an essential component of a successful urban region. Metropolitan regions are attractive and economically sustainable, in part, because they move people efficiently and affordably.

Transit needs to serve the region's residents and communities by providing:

- Local convenience
- Regional accessibility
- Means to help the region thrive

Economic growth and vitality in a major urban region require good transit. For example:

- Businesses are now consistently factoring transit accessibility and quality into location decisions
- Developers increasingly seek opportunities to build higher density, mixed-use developments convenient to transit
- People who don't have to rely as much on personal automobiles for transportation have a lower cost of living

How we measure the performance of transit matters. In a time of scarce public resources, transit needs to maximize economic benefits to the region. System efficiencies are important, for example, but efficiencies alone won't measure the local economic or quality of life benefits that transit brings.

System Performance and the NEIL Transit Task Force Guiding Principles

Several of the guiding principles of the Northeastern Illinois Transit Task Force relate directly to System Performance, specifically:

1. Put the customer first by offering a safe, well-maintained, coordinated, fast, convenient, and accessible system that is a viable transportation alternative.
2. Promote economic vitality by matching development with transit service, connecting communities, employment centers, and other destinations throughout the region.
3. Plan ambitiously and adapt to change, continually refining transit services and investments to increase ridership, relieve congestion, and provide an abundance of transportation choices.
4. Embrace innovative technology and systems in finance, communications, vehicles, infrastructure, and customer service.

Meeting the guiding principles to achieve world-class transit in Northeastern Illinois requires our transit system to:

- Be safe and reliable
- Effectively connect the region's residents and communities with jobs and other destinations
- Reduce the cost of living and improve residents' quality of life by reducing reliance on private cars for mobility
- Operate efficiently and secure the resources necessary to bring the transit network to a state of good repair and expand it in a way that best serves the region
- Work with other units of government to maximize the economic development opportunities and impacts of existing and expanded transit
- Integrate land use and transportation planning to address overall regional goals
- Foster emerging transportation solutions that will increase overall mobility and convenience, and integrate those with transit

Findings related to System Performance

Note: These are broad, draft findings supported by input the Task Force and working group have received from various sources.

1. The existing system operates efficiently relative to other major systems for a number of key operating metrics (e.g. operating cost per mile for bus, CTA rail, and Metra rail)
2. In many measures of how well transit is serving the region, the results are less positive:
 - Ridership has grown in recent years, but the growth is slow; other regions are experiencing more rapid growth than NEIL
 - Transit is taking a smaller share of commuting trips in NEIL—and our region is experiencing greater loss than most other transit-served regions in the country, including others with “legacy” systems
 - Current RTA ridership projections show that we will fall well short of meeting CMAP's goal to double transit use by 2040
 - Current major job centers in the region are not well served by transit; and most jobs in the region cannot be reached in even a 90-minute commute
 - The Chicago region is not leveraging transit to maximize economic development; peer regions are capturing more growth and development in transit zones than is Northeastern Illinois
 - Other regions are outpacing Chicago in transit system investment and expansion
 - Significant portions of the region have no transit access ('transit deserts')

- Road congestion is increasing, is an economic drain, and decreases quality of life
3. Planning and operations are fragmented, making it extremely difficult to effectively manage a regional approach to transit and development.
- There is no comprehensive set of goals for transit in the region. The RTA compiles performance data on a number of indicators, but these are not measured against overall goals.
 - While planning occurs at the RTA as well as at the individual service boards, there is little coordination of planning, or coordinated implementation of individual plans, to address systemwide goals
 - The overall regional plan (*GO TO 2040*) has two goals for transit: increased ridership and job accessibility. There is currently no mechanism to manage transit and land use decisions in an integrated way to achieve these goals
 - The current structure creates operational inefficiency, redundant service, and gaps in service. Agencies are doing more to coordinate with each other, but synchronization is difficult under the current structure, and coordination tends to be only on a project-by-project basis
 - There are few mechanisms to tie public and private development decisions and opportunities with transit considerations (e.g. prioritizing public investments in housing, economic development, and public facilities to transit zones), which contributes to long-term mismatches between community amenities and transit access
 - Transit funds and investments are not allocated to achieve any overarching goal or systemwide strategy, but are distributed based on past practice and historic formulas
4. Meeting the current and future mobility needs and overall vitality of the region requires more transit service and expanded resources
- Additional resources are necessary to achieve a state of good repair across the system
 - Strategies for expansion include both long-term and short-term opportunities:
 - i. Extending the rail system to fill gaps
 - ii. Increasing frequency of service on existing routes
 - iii. Expanding operating hours and allocating vehicles and personnel to reflect changing commuter needs such as the growth in reverse commuting
 - iv. Complementing fixed-route services with flexible, last mile services
 - Planning and implementation of strategies to improve and expand service should take into account the broader economic benefits of transit investments

Proposed Recommendations

The transit system must be refocused with customer satisfaction as the primary objective. The ultimate goal of transit is to enable residents and visitors to easily, conveniently, and affordably access jobs and opportunities throughout the region. Simply focusing on the operation and preservation of the legacy transit system is not enough – the goal must be to meet the mobility needs of the region’s residents and businesses, including those who do not currently use it. The transit system does not exist to move trains and buses – it exists to move people.

With this in mind, the System Performance Working Group proposes a new, broader mandate for the northeastern Illinois transit system. The system will:

- improve overall regional mobility for residents and visitors
- increase transit ridership
- increase transportation affordability
- expand access to jobs, labor markets, and other key destinations.

We also recommend three specific actions:

1. **Prepare and implement a plan to improve regional mobility and increase transit ridership throughout the region.** The plan should be designed to achieve the targets set by CMAP in *GO TO 2040*: 13.5% of weekday trips be made via transit, 75% of the population and 80% of jobs be within walking distance of transit. This plan should address:
 - Increasing access to job centers and population centers underserved by transit
 - Improving system integration and connectivity
 - Effectively communicating transit information and benefits to current and potential riders
 - Identifying short-, medium-, and long-term expansion priorities
 - Increasing transit-oriented development and location efficiency
 - Integration of transit with new mobility options and last-mile services
 - Expanding accessibility and ADA paratransit
 - Using public investment and incentives (transit and non-transit) to achieve plan goals
2. **In addition to identifying new resources for transit, the State of Illinois should consider how it can leverage its existing transportation, housing, economic development, and financing resources** so that transit goals are better integrated with land use and development.
3. **Create regional performance measures that assess progress toward implementing the plan and achieving its goals.** The regional performance measures should include:
 - Transit service and expansion:
 - i. Increased ridership
 - ii. Access to jobs and other destinations
 - iii. Transit mode choices and connectivity
 - iv. Percentage of system accessible by the disabled
 - v. Level of service, including hours of operation and frequency
 - vi. Cost-effective operation
 - vii. Progress toward achieving a state of good repair

viii. Public involvement in identifying and prioritizing transit service expansion

- Transit and economic development:
 - i. The degree to which regional development and investment is linked to transit
 - ii. How much riders save by not having to rely on private vehicle use
 - iii. Reducing the share of share of income that is expended for transportation and housing
 - iv. Location decisions made by businesses
 - v. Proportion of regional growth that is accessible to transit

The governance structure and funding methodologies need to be designed to achieve the above mandate and realize the two recommendations. The governance recommendations should provide clear accountability for implementation of transit system goals.